

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (2)

The water was cold enough to make him gasp, but it cleared his head, as did the jarring pain in his side. He jogged doggedly through the creek, sucking air through gritted teeth, one hand clamped tight against the wound. The bleeding was worse now, but he dared not slow down.

Shivering, Rhys left the stream at the base of the hill and considered. If he could climb its sheer slope, the dogs would be unable to follow. If he couldn't, he'd fall to his death.

Still free

, he thought; he'd still be free. As long as he could see the sacred blue of the sky as he died...By all the gods, anything would be better than returning to the dark, windowless cell of the arena.

His breath hitched in his lungs as he began the ascent, pain knifing through his injury until his entire left side throbbed savagely. The hillside appeared taller and steeper by the minute, and it seemed to take forever before he was even above the trees. He felt exposed on the rock face, although he knew the hunters' eyes would be searching the ground for his trail. Even if they did look up, the forest branches would likely shield him from their sight.

Nothing would shield him if he fell. Rhys had to stop more and more frequently, clinging to handholds with eyes closed until dizziness passed. It was early summer, and he was sweating from exertion, but he felt as cold as if it were winter. There was a strange tinny taste in his mouth. He knew that if he looked down, the rocks would be smeared with his blood.

Finally, he gained a high, narrow ledge that was supporting three late-blossoming rowan bushes and rested his elbows on it, gasping for air like a fish. The pain had become a live thing that raged in the cage of his body and shook his very bones. Rhys grasped the base of one of the bushes, seeking to steady himself, hoping that by resting a few moments he could somehow find enough strength to continue. Knowing that he had little left. He was spent, bled out like a deer with an arrow in it. His vision was narrowing. Behind the blooming rowans, he could see no rock face, only darkness.

Gaping darkness...

By all the gods, there was a cave! He fought to drag his body onto the ledge. Agony reared up like an angry bear, slashing and biting at him. Still he struggled on, teeth clamped against the scream that threatened to rip from his throat. Just as it seemed certain that he would black out and tumble to the ground below, he managed to heave his broad-shouldered frame securely onto the rocky shelf, with the thick trunks of the sturdy bushes between him and the open air. Lungs heaving and heart threatening to smash through his chest, Rhys reverently touched his collarbone just as his eyes rolled back in his head.

The full moon was high in the heavens when he awoke at last. The pain awoke too, chewing at his side the way a hungry wolf tears at a carcass. It drove the grogginess from his mind, and he lay blinking on his back. It was good to see the sky, he thought. Good to see the dark, deep blue, an ocean upon which the stars could sail...He wondered if his father and brothers were up there, his sister. The members of his tribe who had stood against the Roman invaders. All dead, all slain...

The Romans.

Immediately, he listened for the sounds of dogs, of hunters, but there was nothing but the whir of insects, the calls of night birds, and the barely audible squeak of bats. His pursuers had likely camped for the night, but he could see neither fire-glow nor smoke from the forest below. Rhys rolled to his good side, although his wound screamed at him just the same. He stared out from between the glistening flower clusters of the rowan bushes with his teeth chattering uncontrollably. Tiny white petals had snowed down around him as he slept, but they did nothing to stave the chill from his body. With a strange kind of detachment, he knew he would die if he remained on the ledge—was likely dying anyway.

It would be easier to die.

Yet, the gods had decreed that one must struggle to live, and so Rhys once more forced himself to move. His head swam and his stomach lurched until he thought he might vomit from the pain. He didn't have the strength left to stand, but he needed shelter. If he could just get warm, it might be safe to rest for a while...On all fours, he made his way inside the dark cave, reaching out a hand from time to time to feel his way along the wall. The stone was dry, and as he struggled farther into the darkness, the floor of the cave became a soft mix of sand and dead leaves. Rhys inhaled carefully, trying to draw a scent from his surroundings, alert for any sign that the cave was the den of a predator. He smelled nothing but his own sweat and blood. He moved on, inches at a time, desperate to get deeper into the cave before his ebbing strength gave out entirely.

Without warning, the blackness of the cave's interior gave way to gray. At first, he thought he'd gotten turned around and was somehow facing the entrance again, but a glance over his shoulder showed the rowan bushes against the starry bright sky behind him as they should be. Ahead of him, though, there was light where there should have been none. Light, faint but growing steadily, was coming from *inside* the cave.

Mere heartbeats later, Rhys found himself nearly blinded by an uncanny brilliance, a white light that shamed the full moon. He squinted into the light and, for a brief, wild moment, considered flinging himself off the ledge or perhaps calling out to the Romans who were hunting him. But pain, exhaustion, and blood loss combined to betray him. One thought remained as he passed out, a phrase every child in his village had heard often, a warning that every elder delivered in harsh whispers...

Beware the Tylwyth Teg.

ONE

*Caerleon, Wales
Twenty-First Century*

T
he dog was back.

Dr. Morgan Edwards tried to focus her attention on the tour guide as he related the history of the ancient Roman amphitheater. The enormous arena, capable of seating nearly six thousand, had been built outside the walls of Isca Silurum, a legionary fort. Legend held that, in another time, this part of Wales had been a favored base for King Arthur himself.

Morgan had been born and raised in America. Fascinated by her grandmother's country, she was usually keen to learn all she could about it. Yet, her attention kept returning to the huge black mastiff that sat silently by a square-cut stone. He surveyed her with the great, sad eyes of his massive breed, a breed more ancient than the ruins around it.

I'll bet you eat a lot, fella.

Morgan had treated only three mastiffs in her busy veterinary practice. Her clients by and large appeared to prefer beagles and dachshunds, Labs and poodles. Her clinic in Spokane Valley, Washington, saw a few Great Danes and Saint Bernards as well, but the great black dog would dwarf even those big breeds. She knew that mastiffs had been used by the Romans for war—their fearful size making them lethal weapons. They had been used in the arena as well, perhaps right where she was standing. The thought made her shiver, or maybe it was the strangeness of having seen the mastiff on every day of her trip, at every stop. While the dog never came close, he never failed to make an appearance. At first, she'd thought there were an awful lot of the monstrous dogs in this small country. That is, until she'd spotted the distinctive metal collar around his muscled neck. It was wide and ornate, almost like a broad silver torque. Perhaps it was a replica of some ancient design. Maybe the animal was part of the tour, a living prop?

She grabbed the flowery sleeve of her traveling buddy, a tall white-haired woman named Gwen, whom she'd met at the beginning of the tour. "He's here again."

The older woman looked over her glasses with bright eyes, spotting the animal at once, even as she clutched her travel bag to her chest. "How fascinating! I wonder what kind of energy such a creature would have. Probably negative, don't you think?"

"Energy?"

"I'm sure it's a
grim
, you know, just like the ones in my books. A
barghest
. What the Welsh call a

gwyllgi

, though goodness knows I'm not pronouncing it right. A messenger from the faery realm."

"A messenger of what?"

"Why, whoever sees a grim is usually dead in a month and almost always by violent means."

"Great. So, it's the canine version of the Grim Reaper?"

"Not quite. A grim only heralds death, it doesn't collect souls. At least that's how the old stories go, but I've never read of a grim being out in broad daylight, have you? Are its eyes glowing red?" Gwen frowned as she strained to see.

Morgan hid a smile. As a child, her

nainie

—the Welsh word for grandma—had told her stories about the grim, but she hadn't thought of it in connection with the flesh and blood animal that sat not thirty yards away.

Gwen loved all things supernatural, however, and

of course

she would think of the dog in paranormal terms first.

To each his own.

Morgan chose to humor her friend, dutifully shading her pale-blue eyes and squinting.

The dog's baleful eyes seemed amber, almost golden. "Nope, not even bloodshot," she reported.

"Well, it's probably just an ordinary dog then, but I suppose we shouldn't take chances. I don't want it heralding my demise or yours." Gwen laughed, a pretty sound that reminded Morgan of delicate glass wind chimes, and turned to follow the group that was now shuffling its way to the bus. Morgan looked back at the dog. She'd always had a deep affinity for animals, a connection to them, and although the mastiff was intimidating, she sensed a great sadness radiating from him.

She'd taken only a few steps toward the animal when the bus driver sounded the high-pitched horn, signaling it was time to leave.

Crap.

"Do you need help? Are you lost?" she called out to the dog. She'd often been teased for talking to animals as if they were people, but she felt strongly that animals understood intent if not words—although many understood words better than their owners gave them credit for. "If you could just tell me what you want, I'd love to help you." The dog blinked suddenly, rapidly, but otherwise didn't move. His expression remained mournful, his tail unmoving. To Morgan's practiced eye, the animal didn't appear neglected. His black coat was as glossy as a raven's wing, and although he was lean, she could see no ribs in the broad, muscled body, no evidence of hunger. What did the dog want? Why was he following the tour bus? And why had the other tourists failed to take notice of the unusual canine? They should have been talking about it, quizzing the staff, and taking photographs. Instead, no one seemed to pay the dog any mind except Morgan and Gwen.

The horn sounded a second time, and reluctantly she obeyed. After she took her seat beside Gwen, she looked out the window, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. There were only the rolling green hills and the silent ruins.

Wales had plenty of large modern motels, but this tour featured smaller historic lodgings. Part of the tour group was booked into the Three Salmon Inn, and the rest, including Morgan and Gwen, in the smaller Cross Keys Hotel. Morgan thought the centuries-old building was charming and comfortable, but to Gwen it was downright exciting.

“They have a ghost here, you know. Some say it’s a serving girl, and others say it’s a monk.”

Morgan’s eyebrows went up as she perused the menu in the hotel dining room. “Isn’t there a big difference between the two?”

“Well, a mysterious figure in a long gown could be either one, now couldn’t it? It says in the pamphlet that’s all that anyone has seen of it. I wish

/

could see it.”

“You’d really like to see a ghost, wouldn’t you? Most people would run the other way.”

“Most people would rather not have proof that other worlds exist,” said Gwen. “But I prefer to be open to all possibilities.”

“My grandmother used to say something very similar.”

Gwen smiled as if the remark pleased her immensely. “I think the roast beef sounds good, don’t you?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I like those little Yorkshire puddings that come with it. Although I’ve never understood why they call them puddings—they’re much more like a crispy little bun.”

The waiter collected their menus and their orders, and Gwen pulled a book from her handbag. “Look what I found in the gift shop here.”